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U.S. Department of the Interior

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NPS Fire and Fuels Management

Tom Nichols, the Fire Management Officer (FMO) in Yosemite National Park for the last three years, accepted a position with the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise as the Deputy Fire Planning Program Leader this September. He oversees the entire fire management planning and fire budget for the National Park Service.

The FMO position will likely be filled this summer. In the interim, Deron Mills is the acting FMO. Deron has worked in Yosemite for 23 fire seasons and as the District FMO is responsible for the structure fire and fire prevention programs in the park. He is the Operations Section Chief for the South Central Sierra Incident Management Team (an interagency team) and has been since 1999.

The Role of Fire Archeology in Yosemite

The following interview is with Jun Kinoshita, Fire Archeologist for Yosemite National Park. He, plus a staff of three seasonal Archeological Technicians, work with the fire management program in the park.

Jun Kinoshita briefs firefighters prior to a prescribed fire.

What is fire archeology? Describe your job briefly.

The National Park Service is required to manage cultural resources on its land. I am responsible for cultural resource compliance for the fire management program in Yosemite. We need to know what those resources are and, because fire is such an integral part of the ecosystem here, we try to take into account the direct and indirect impacts of fire itself and the impacts of fire management activities on cultural resources. I work directly with fire managers to preserve, protect and document these resources.

What constitutes cultural resources?

They include archeological sites (a collection of objects such as projectile points, bedrock mortars, hearths, or animal bones that represent the physical remains of past cultures), historic structures, traditional use areas (gathering areas or spiritual areas), museum objects, and cultural landscapes (a landscape having a culturally ascribed meaning, such as Yosemite Valley).

Can you give an example of how this works in the field?

For prescribed fires, we look to see if the area has been surveyed for cultural resources. If it has, then we look at what types of known cultural resources are in the unit and determine if they will be impacted. For example, an archeological site may have burned over many times in the past. However, increased fuel loading from over 100 years of fire suppression may introduce higher fire intensities than what the site has historically seen and may rob archeologists of certain types of information. Some traditional use areas may benefit from regular burning but we may need to coordinate with traditional gatherers in order to ensure that our timing is appropriate.

I really like the interaction of fire and cultural resource management. It's exciting and I like the idea of connection with the past and helping to tell a story that might not be told otherwise.

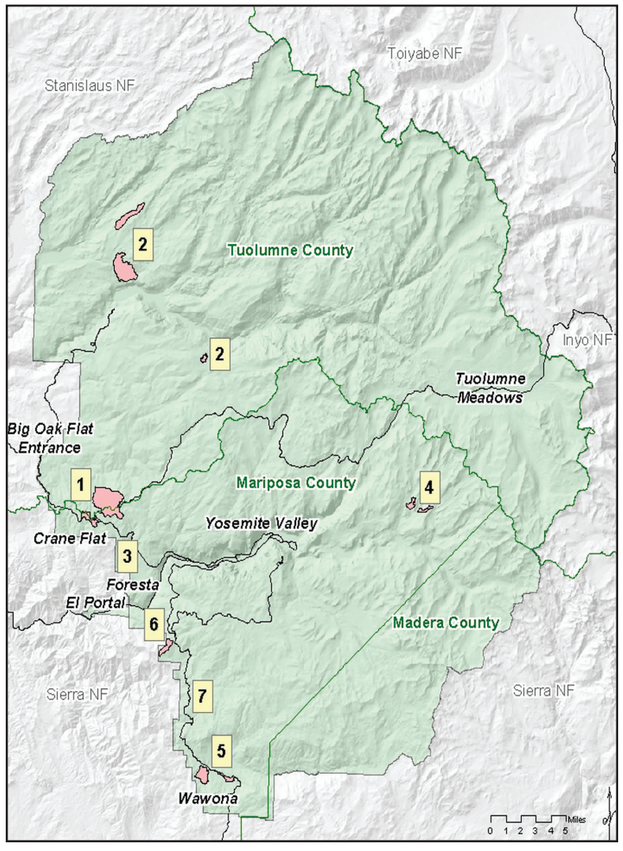
Crystal West and Echo Purtell gather data after a fire event.

Yosemite's 2005 Fire Season Highlights

Over 6000 acres burned in Yosemite National Park in 2005 through a combination of fire suppression, prescribed fire, lightning fires that spread naturally for ecological benefit when they posed no threat to life or property, and mechanical thinning. Prior to fire suppression by European settlers in the 1800s, over 16,000 acres a year burned in Yosemite each year.

The low occurrence of large wildfires nationally, aligned with excellent weather and air quality conditions for prescribed fire, allowed fire managers to complete multiple prescribed fire projects. Yosemite works closely with the regional and county air regulators to minimize smoke impacts to the public.

1 Gin Flat Prescribed Fire/ Crane Flat Prescribed Fire: 257 acres were completed in Crane Flat in June and 1,520 acres were completed in Gin Flat in October. Excellent smoke dispersal minimized smoke impacts in the park and gateway communities.



2 Wapama Complex: This complex grew to 1,583 acres and included the Wapama, Laurel, and Harden Fires. Fire managers slowed growth on the western flank of the Wapama Fire to minimize smoke impacts and prevent the spread of the fire near the cliffs above the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir.

3 Suppression Events: Intense thunderstorms igniting multiple lightning fires in the Foresta, Crane Flat, and Yosemite West areas. Numerous fires from these storms (including one outside the park below Yosemite West) were detected and suppressed by Yosemite firefighters because of their proximity to these communities in or near the park. The Backdoor Fire in Hodgdon Meadow, likely a human-caused fire, grew to 82 acres before it was suppressed.

Important Fire Projects Completed

4 Echo Complex: The Echo and Crystal Fires comprised this complex. These natural lightning-ignited fires grew to 180 acres before reaching natural granite barriers.

5 Wawona Soupbowl/ Big Creek Prescribed Fires: These units in Wawona were completed in May and June and totaled 519 acres. The fires provided key protection to the community of Wawona as well as thinning the forest for greater biodiversity.

6 Yosemite West Prescribed Fire: This 225 -acre project took place in October and created fuel breaks within the park to help protect Yosemite West from unwanted fire.

7 Roadside Piles and Pile Burning: Fire crews and contract crews continued with 308 acres of mechanical treatment in the form of piles on the Wawona Road from Bishop Creek to Wawona Campground. Pile burning will proceed through the winter months as conditions permit.

Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation and Yosemite Fire Management Partner in Prescribed Fire Project

A very unique prescribed fire project was completed this fall in Yosemite Valley. Yosemite fire managers and members of the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation completed this project in partnership for both ecological and cultural resource benefit. This fire was timed to try to control the non-native and invasive Himalayan blackberry and to encourage growth of traditionally- used plants.

Yosemite firefighters received the opportunity to work with the Miwuk who have thousands of years of burning experience. The indigenous people of Yosemite Valley have used fire as a tool for thousands of years. These anthropogenic fires clear meadows and open the canopy for sun-loving species like the black oak --a staple food source for the indigenous people of Yosemite Valley. A traditional ceremony preceded the prescribed fire project and the Miwuk employed traditional ignition methods.

The Southern Sierra Miwuk employed traditional ignition practices during the prescribed fire.